

FIFTY YEARS OF THE WILSON ORNITHOLOGICAL SOCIETY*

In 10 more years the Wilson Ornithological Society will celebrate its 100th birthday. Having reached the ripe old age of 4 score and 10, it seems fitting that we look backward in appreciation of the Society's progress over the years.

A few of us—fewer than 20—have been members for 50 years or more. These have been privileged to share membership with Founders of the Society. Lynds Jones and R. M. Strong, both Founders, were still living in 1950. With this bridge we can span the entire 90 years of the organization's existence.

Of course it was not organized as The Wilson Ornithological Society; the founders thought of it as a club for persons of like interests, and they named it The Wilson Ornithological Club. So it remained until the mid-50's of the present century. At that time personal income taxes, and the exemptions which might be claimed for scientific travel, dictated the change of name. The I.R.S. was inclined to look more favorably on claims for attending a Society meeting than a Club get-together.

When a roll of members was published in 1902, it listed 60 active members. These included T. S. Roberts, of Minnesota; Norman A. Wood, of Michigan; V. E. Shelford, of Illinois; Francis Hobart Herrick, of Ohio; and others whose names have loomed large in the ornithology of mid-America. Lynds Jones, of Oberlin, Ohio, served the Club as its President during two widely-separated periods, and his tenure as Editor of *The Wilson Bulletin* spanned 34 years.

The patriarch of the modern Wilson Society, in point of membership, is Alexander Wetmore, who joined in 1903, the year the Wright Brothers took wing from Kill Devil Hill. No other living member has seen more than 65 years of the Society's unfolding history. As stated previously, about 20 living persons have been affiliated for 50 years or more. A goodly number of these have been active in Society affairs, and so have had privileged views of its activities.

My own membership dates from 1927. Early in my tenure I began to attend annual meetings of the Club, and have been eternally grateful that I had these opportunities. I saw many of the persons whose names were appearing in *The Wilson Bulletin*; I met some of them, and they became personalities whom I would remember the next time.

At one of my early meetings Jesse M. Shaver, of Tennessee was President, and he was followed in office by Josselyn Van Tyne. What made this association remarkable was that both these men were 6 feet, 8 inches in height. Seeing them together on the platform was overwhelming. Such stature was extraordinary in those days; we had not then begun through some sort of Lamarekian genetics to produce human beanpoles to meet the demands of the National Basketball Association.

Jesse Shaver commented on the circumstance. He recounted that he had been in Pittsburgh a few years previously, and had noted people looking at him speculatively as he moved over the University of Pittsburgh campus. "Now," he said, "I return to find the Cathedral of Learning here!"

A few years before the outbreak of World War II, I became the Club's Secretary, through this connection I was privileged to have inside views of the Club's traumas and struggles during the war years. Many of our finest young men and women were in service. Gasoline was severely rationed, and most automobile travel was out of the question. Travel by train was uncomfortable and exhausting; persons in uniform took priority; dining was sparse or non-existent; everything civilian gave way to the exigencies of war.

* Text of the banquet address given by past-president Dr. Maurice Brooks at the 1978 annual meeting of the Wilson Society.

This became a matter of considerable concern to Wilson members and their officers and Council. We are incorporated in the State of Illinois; each year an official meeting must be held, and a report on organization activities filed with the Secretary of State in that Commonwealth. A goodly number of the officials were in service, many of them overseas and completely out of reach. We had to meet officially or lose our corporate charter, so we began searching for places where travel was possible and where we might come together for essential business matters.

One such place turned out to be the Laboratories of Ohio State University, at Put-in-Bay on Lake Erie. By scraping the barrel, we got enough people for a quorum; thus we fulfilled the law's requirements and kept ourselves legitimate.

During this war period our sister organizations were experiencing similar difficulties. In the American Ornithologists' Union there were concentrations of officers and Council members in 4 places—Boston, New York City, Philadelphia, and Washington. Essential business of the Union could be transacted in any one of these.

As a matter of fraternal goodwill, the A.O.U. had officially invited representatives of 2 sister organizations—the Cooper Ornithological Club and the Wilson Ornithological Club—to appoint representatives to sit as members of the Union's Council. George Miksch Sutton, the Wilson Club's President *in absentia* (he was in service), asked me to serve as our Council member at an A.O.U. meeting in New York City.

This was an experience I shall not forget. First of all, I was only an associate of the A.O.U.—not even an elective member at that time. I found myself sitting in small meetings with such people as Robert Cushman Murphy, Alexander Wetmore, Witmer Stone, James Chapin, Frederick C. Lincoln, Herbert Friedmann, William Beebe, and others whose names were celebrated in the outdoor world.

All these men knew each other personally and professionally. They were used to working together on first name basis; practically all of them were Fellows in the A.O.U. And here was I sitting on the Council, an unknown, and merely an associate member of the organization. Such an unheard-of situation could have been embarrassing to everyone concerned. But it wasn't. Largely through the innate courtesy and kindness of Alex Wetmore, I was made welcome, was extended every consideration, and was made to feel that I was to take part fully in Council's deliberations. This demonstration of humanness has meant much to me in the years since.

The Wilson Club's Secretaryship during World War II years carried unusual duties, and unusual opportunities. I had assumed that most persons in service would prefer that their *Wilson Bulletins* be sent to their homes, there to remain until more settled times. But that didn't prove to be the case; most of our members in uniform expressed very implicitly the wish that their *Bulletins* follow them. This, of course, led to a great deal of extra work; it wasn't unusual to have 2 or 3 address changes for a member in a single year. But from the letters I received it appeared that the *Bulletins* were a touch of home, a return to normal interests, and a valued element in morale. I still have a file of letters of appreciation.

It soon became evident that the Club could be of additional service to its members. As service personnel began to be placed in all parts of the world, I received increasing numbers of letters from members in uniform who expressed a wish that on free days and leave time they might meet people with bird interests, and might have a chance to get afield in some of the unfamiliar terrain they were occupying. With our international membership, this was usually easy; a letter to a member in New Zealand, Australia, or Great Britain brought cordial response; contacts followed, and many a friendship was established. It wasn't unusual to have invitations to member's homes as a part of this

hospitality; our people abroad were afforded insights that they would otherwise have missed.

When happier times returned and it was again possible to schedule regular meetings of the Club, our first one was held in Omaha, Nebraska, Nov. 28-31, 1946. This was an unforgettable session; emotions were very close to the surface. After 5 long years it was good to be together again.

A major feature of the Omaha meeting was the presence of Nikolaas Tinbergen, visiting America after a long period of involvement in the Dutch underground during Nazi occupation of his homeland. He gave a notable paper at one of the regular sessions, his subject being "The Study of Bird Behavior." He spoke again informally at the annual dinner, telling of what America's help to Holland had meant during the dark days of the occupation.

Of course the President spoke, as he always does at such occasions. George Sutton had resumed his interrupted term, and he was at his oratorical best that evening. As many can attest, that is very good indeed, and before he was through there were a lot of damp eyes in his audience. He chose to speak on "Fire," drawing on his Arctic experiences and what a fire can mean there during the winter months of darkness. He spoke of fire as a guide to safety in the gloom of night, of the flame as a symbol of warmth, comfort, and fellowship. Of course he drew analogies between the Arctic night and the rekindling of the flame in the Wilson Club. It was a moving experience for all who were present. It served to start the Club off with new energy, new goals, and new appreciation for the meaning of its fellowship.

During the next few years there were other interesting developments in the Club's program. We were affiliated with the American Association for the Advancement of Science, and that organization chose to invite a representative of affiliated societies to sit on the A.A.S. Council. I had the opportunity to represent the Club on a few such occasions, and I know that it was a tremendous experience for me. Here were many of the world's leading scientists, in all fields of scientific endeavor. With them I participated in the business affairs of the Association, listened to arguments, heard plans made for future endeavors in new directions, and felt that I was in the main stream of American science.

When plans were being made for the 1950 meeting of the Wilson Club, I was bold enough to propose a meeting at Jackson's Mill. I had a precedent for such a country meeting; a year before the American Society of Ichthyology and Herpetology had held a successful meeting at Higgins Lake, Michigan. Persons who attended were loud in their praise of the meeting; they found somewhat primitive conditions a stimulus to informality and productive field work. I knew the possibilities of Jackson's Mill as a meeting spot; I had been associated with its development since 1922.

Some of our participants arrived with a lot of misgivings. West Virginia, after all, had a national reputation for feuds, coal wars, and abject poverty. They didn't know what conditions might be facing them.

This is not the time or place to review that meeting in detail. Of one thing I am sure, however; it was an unqualified success. The reluctance to attempt a country meeting was gone for good.

Of course we didn't play down the Appalachian Mountains image and stereotype. An entertainment feature was a concert by a jug band from the Forestry Division of West Virginia University. Band members chose to appear in straw hats, ragged blue jeans, and no shoes. The wife of one of these men was sitting at a table with 2 ladies from Chicago. She derived great joy when she overheard one say to the other, "I suppose they do *have* shoes."

Two years after the Jackson's Mill meeting, we planned another country session, this one at Gatlinburg, Tennessee, in the Great Smokies. There were great anticipations as this meeting approached; after all, the mountains are spectacular, and the biota challenging here in the southeastern outpost of the great trans-continental spruce-fir forest. We had a big attendance, and the meeting was a huge success. It did have one slight hitch; for the 3 days of our sessions there was continuous rain and fog. The mountains never did clear, and a lot of members left without seeing the Great Smokies.

From its early days the Wilson Society has welcomed as fully participating members amateur as well as professional ornithologists. This has been in recognition of the fact that many bird students are amateurs in the truest original meaning of that term. In the past 40 years or so, persons (a lot of them) who are not professionally employed in the field have served as our officers and Council members. So far as I can measure it, this has been of unalloyed benefit to the Society.

It has also been true through the years that the Wilson Society has served as a training ground for officers of the American Ornithologists' Union and other ornithological groups. This, as it seems to me, is highly desirable. Why should trained technical people not make more extensive use of their talents and experience?

As I bring together the memories of 50 years in the Wilson Society, my conviction grows that I would have been infinitely poorer without the contacts that it has afforded. Society-inspired friendships have been warm and lasting. I have not ceased to marvel at the succession of dedicated persons who seem providentially waiting in the wings to take up the responsibilities which the organization must entail. We have seen, and benefited from, a succession of tremendously capable and devoted Editors of *The Wilson Bulletin*. Our Secretaries and Treasurers have labored to keep our rolls current and our finances sound. So have our other officers, our Council members, our Trustees, and our committee chairpersons. We have been well served by a lot of good people.

And so in closing I choose to return to George Sutton's tribute to fire and its meanings. The Society's flame, kindled 90 years ago, still burns brightly. There is inspiration, warmth and fellowship around its hearth. May this first 90 years be only the happy prologue!

MAURICE BROOKS
Jackson's Mill, W. Va.
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